"BABEŞ-BOLYAI" UNIVERSITY CLUJ-NAPOCA FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY DOCTORAL SCHOOL "HISTORY. CIVILIZATION. CULTURE"

The State and the Roma in Socialist Romania. An Oral History Research

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Key words: Roma, communism, assimilation, memory, state, power

Summary

In this thesis, through an oral history research, I aim to make a contribution towards clarifing an underresearched subject in the Romanian historiografy, the relationship between "the state" and the Roma during the Romanian socialist regime. At the end of the Second World War the Roma were mainly seen by the Romanian communist autorities as a social problem. During the 1950s, their deplorable social, cultural and economic situation was believed to be a consequence of their exploatation during previous historical periods. The main solution to the Roma problem was believed to be their assimilation into the new Romanian socialist society. To this end, three main measures were identified: a) proletarization/ integration of the Roma in the Socialist economy, b) integration in the educational system, c) the sedetarisation of nomadic and semi-nomadic communities. These measures were the expressions of the interlinking of an imported soviet model with particular national circumstances and were to be put into practice through the work of several modern state institutions of social discipline such as: schools, the army, health services, etc., as well as through the coercive means employed by institutions like the Militie and the Securitate. Ultimately, the goal was to impose on the Roma the new forms of knowledge developed by the socialist regime, to reshape them into what the state define as productive socialist citizens.

In my analysis I used concepts such as *power*, *state*, *modernity*, whose precise definitions were intensely debated in the historiography on the Soviet Union. Thus, following the theoretical considerations proposed by revisionist (and post-revisionist) historians, as well as philosophers such as Michelle Foucault, I focused my attention on local level interactions. As such, the state is not seen as a monolithic entity with complete control over the society and its bureaucratic apparatus but, on the contrary, as an actor with an incomplete control over policy implementation, especially at a local level.

At the same time, I investigated the memory of the communist period in Roma communities using the theoretical considerations proposed by the Italian school of oral history, particularly by the oral historian Alessandro Portelli, as well as concepts such as *nostalgia*, *dissonance* and *social trauma*. I focused my attention on two main topics: the way Roma remember and give meaning to the social assimilation policies implemented by the communist state and the traumatic memory of the repression exercised by the state against the Roma at different times in the period between 1948-1989.

As shown in the first chapter of the thesis, during the communist period in Romania, the Roma were mainly seen as a social category by state authorities. The criterion for the classification of the Roma groups was that of spatial mobility. Thus, three main Roma communities/ groups were identified: sedentary, nomadic and seminomadic. The latter two were depicted as the most problematic since mobility was associated with negative characteristics such as poverty, illiteracy, poor living conditions as well as a general lack of state control.

During the 1950s and 1960s no nation-wide program or legislation was elaborated to this end, but local authorities were tasked with the implementation of these social assimilation measures. In the late 1970s, in the context of a significant increase of the Roma population, central authorities conducted an evaluation of the integration of the Roma in the Romanian society which demonstrated the failure of this policy. According to reports drafted at that time, nomadic and semi-nomadic communities could still be found in the country, the majority of the work-able Roma refused to get employed, illiteracy was widespread and the adults refused to send their children to school, the living conditions of many Roma communities were deplorable even to the point of constituting a danger to public health. In the central authorities view, the main cause of this situation was the bad implementation of what they believed to be suitable policies. The responsibility for the situation of the Roma communities rested with party-state bureaucrats who did not do enough to help these communities.

However, as shown in the second chapter of the thesis, an analysis of power relations at the local level outlines the fact that the relationship between the state and the Roma was more complex. An analysis of oral history narratives on the communist assimilation policies represent an argument in favour of seeing the interaction between the socialist state and the Roma as a form of negotiation at a local level. One argument in this regard is the policy of sedentarisation of nomadic and semi-nomadic communities defined as a process meant not only as one whose aim was to restrict one's spatial mobility but also as an instrument of changing Roma values, attitudes and traditional forms of social organization.

Firstly, local Roma population resisted the state's intervention within the limits permitted by an authoritarian political regime. Secondly, resistance appeared not only at the level of Roma communities but also among local non-Roma population. Thirdly, resistance also appeared at the level of local party-state bureaucrats. In practice, in the context of loosely enforced policies from central level, even in the cases when Roma were forced to settle in a locality, sedentarisation became a topic of negotiation between local [sometimes regional/central] party bureaucrats, local non-Roma communities and Roma communities.

The result was a form of partial sedentarisation and integration in the socialist society. In the case of many traditional Roma communities the process of sedentarisation had a limited impact on changing what the Roma believed to be the core characteristics of their communities. They quickly accepted changes which led to improving their living conditions such as building a house, benefiting from healthcare services, getting employed as tradesmen or agricultural laborers in local collective farms. They also agreed to receive formal education albeit it was always contested by different forms of local knowledge. However, regardless of their situation they firmly refused to abandon what they saw as their traditional culture and social organization. Through negotiation at a local level, they tried to keep their cultural distance from the state as well as to maintain their economic independence.

The analysis of the Roma narratives regarding formal employment in the official socialist economy during the 1960s and 1970s show that part of the Roma interviewees describe their integration in the socialist labor force as a social advancement opportunity. They construct their life story narratives as "an escape from poverty" and consider that having a workplace had a significant positive impact on their lives. However, their accounts do not represent a complete idealization of those times as interviewees also mention several negative aspects such as: long hours, hard manual labor, difficulty in caring for children, difficult working conditions, etc.

An opposing perspective is that of Roma, many from traditional communities, who in trying to maintain their distance from the state involved themselves in informal economic practices. These were made possible by the significant shortages produced by the socialist economy, a constant during the whole communist period, but more pronounced during the economic crisis of the 1980s. As such, many Roma practiced several forms of illegal economic activities such as: trading gold, different foreign merchandise, different goods stolen from state factories (often initially stolen by non-Roma employees). For a significant

number of Roma their involvement in the informal economy represented an essential way to escape state control and maintain economic, social and cultural distance from the state.

Roma integration in the educational system was hindered by a significant number of problems described in similar ways both in oral history narratives and in archival documents. Poverty was one of the main impediments, as families could not provide children with basic food, shoes and clothing so they could attend school, not to mention other items necessary for school related work. Because most of the Roma were living in settlements at the periphery of / nearby villages or towns children had to travel a considerable distance to school, which often proved to be impossible during winter. Another obstacle was represented by anti-Gypsyism and the prejudices of both non-Roma school colleagues, teachers and local bureaucrats. However, opposite accounts are also prevalent in some of the interviews. In spite of several measures identified by the authorities, Roma children access to education remained low in socialist Romania. Those who were able to follow school or alternative adult education courses have a general positive view regarding education and often talk about the importance of education for them and their children, drawing on everyday practical examples.

During the communist period different forms of state repression were a constant in the everyday experiences of almost all citizens regardless of one's ethnicity. Roma narratives on state violence in socialist Romania, presented in the third chapter of the thesis, represent a valuable complementary source to other non-Roma narratives. They vividly describe the negative impact on a personal and community level of abuses done by the states repressive institutions in different contexts, mentioning in particular the application of decree 153/1970 regarding social parasitism as well as several successive laws which regulated the ownership and commercialization of precious metals and foreign currency.

The oral history interviews collected in this thesis represent an important complementary historical source, essential for a better understanding of the Romanian communist period. As shown in the last chapter of the thesis, most of these recollections are characterized by nostalgia and dissonance. The Roma feel nostalgic about the communist past which is described as a period characterized by social security and opportunities for social advancement. At the same time, they did not forget and choose to freely talk about the more negative aspect of life during communism. Nostalgic and dissonant memories are not a consequence of an uncritical engagement with the socialist past. They are however the direct consequences of the Roma negative perception of the post-socialist present as well as the future.

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